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## Nakba in Narratives about Zionism

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The amply documented and recorded facts of Nakba are treated elsewhere in this volume, leaving this paper to focus on the place of Nakba in four narratives related to Zionism. Contests over narratives of Nakba reflect significant imbalance of power between the perpetrators and the victims, the imbalance, which has become greater since 1948. These unequal power relations are reflected not only in the striking difference of military materiel deployed by the Israeli army and the Palestinians, but also in the public acknowledgement of the respective narratives of the conflict in Israel/Palestine. Silencing, renaming and forgetting are effective tools in the hands of the powerful.

Jews who opposed Zionism in principle and from the very beginning developed the first of the four narratives. The second, Zionist, narrative belongs to a group that appears ideologically diverse: cultural Zionists, socialist Zionists, religious Zionists, right-wing or the so-called Revisionist Zionists. The latter group's ideology has won out and is today associated with Zionism *tout court*. The third narrative emerged from former Zionists who have revised their old beliefs and have often regretted their old actions. Finally, the paper turns to the oldest, the largest, and perhaps the most influential group of Zionists—Christian Zionists in dozens of countries—whose number is many times greater than the entire Jewish population in the world.

### Was Nakba predictable?

The first Zionist congress took place in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The unlikely venue was due to the pressure of German Jews on their country's government to forbid such a gathering in Germany: Zionism was undermining their social gains while reinforcing the anti-Semites' claim that Jews did not belong in Germany. In the wake of the congress, Vienna's rabbinical circles sent two emissaries to Palestine to inspect the territory. They sent a laconic cable back to Vienna: "The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man." They discovered that the land was not empty but occupied by a variety of ethnic and religious groups.

When the first atheist Zionists from Russia reached Palestine, they encountered two kinds of reaction. Some locals saw them as Europeans who might bring prosperity, and

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their initial attitude was “wait and see.” The other reaction was total rejection: no contact whatsoever with the newcomers. The first group consisted mostly of Palestinian Arabs. The other group comprised old-time Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. They saw in the arrival of Zionist settlers a theological, a social and a political threat. According to the Israeli historian Yosef Salmon [Salmon 1998: 25]:

[...] the Zionist threat offered the gravest danger, for it sought to rob the traditional community of its very birthright, both in the Diaspora and in Eretz Israel, the object of its messianic hopes. Zionism challenged all the aspects of traditional Judaism: in its proposal of a modern, national Jewish identity; in the subordination of traditional society to new life-styles; and in its attitude to the religious concepts of Diaspora and redemption. The Zionist threat reached every Jewish community. It was unrelenting and comprehensive, and therefore it met with uncompromising opposition.

Zionist settlers and visionaries have often been accused of coining the phrase “a land without a people for a people without a land.” Curiously, however, the earliest published use of the phrase appears to have been made by a Church of Scotland clergyman Alexander Keith in his 1843 book *The Land of Israel According to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob* [Muir 2008: 55–62]. By the late nineteenth century, the phrase was in common use in both Great Britain and the United States among Christians, including a few anti-Semites, interested in “returning” Jews to Palestine. In her 1902 novel, *The Zionist*, English writer Winifred Graham (1873–1950) has her Jewish hero stand before the Zionist congress and advocate for the return of “the people without a country to the country without a people.” The first use of the phrase by a Jew occurred only in 1901 when Israel Zangwill, probably echoing such Christian writings, wrote in the *New Liberal Review* in London that “Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a country” [Muir 2008: 55–62]. Regardless of its actual use by the Zionist activists, the phrase appears as a grim prophecy in view of the fate allotted to non-Jews in Palestine.

Quite a few Jewish Zionists had warned against committing injustice against Palestine’s indigenous population. Ahad Haam (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927), one of the early supporters of Zionism in Russia, later became an articulate critic of its political and military wings. His first article criticizing practical Zionism, called “*Lo ze hadderekh (This is not the way)*,” appeared in 1889. Soon after his 1891 journey to the area he warned against the ‘great error,’ noticeable among Jewish settlers, of treating the fellahin with contempt, of regarding ‘all Arabs as savages of the desert, a people similar to a donkey’ [Shapira 1992: 42]. This colonialist condescendence permeated the Zionist enterprise, and remains largely unabated in

Israeli society to this day.

In his essay, *The Truth from the Land of Israel*, Ahad Haam says that it is an illusion to think of Palestine as an empty country: “We tend to believe abroad that Palestine is nowadays almost completely deserted, a non-cultivated wilderness, and anyone can come there and buy as much land as his heart desires. But in reality this is not the case. It is difficult to find anywhere in the country Arab land which lies fallow [...]” [Brownfeld 1998: 29–31].

The behaviour of Jewish settlers toward the Arabs disturbed him. They had not learned from experience as a minority within a wider population, but acted with malice and disdain. The Arabs, he wrote, understood very well what Zionist intentions were in the country and “if the time should come when the lives of our people in Palestine should develop to the extent that, to a smaller or greater degree they usurp the place of the local population, the latter will not yield easily...We have to treat the local population with love and respect, justly and rightly. And what do our brethren in the land of Israel do? Exactly the opposite! Slaves they were in the country of exile, and suddenly they find themselves in a boundless and anarchic freedom, as is always the case with a slave that has become king; and they behave toward the Arabs with hostility and cruelty.”

Similarly, in an article published in *Ha-Shiloah* in 1907, Yitzhak Epstein, a Russian-born teacher who had settled in Palestine in 1886, voiced an anxiety that was brushed aside by his Zionist contemporaries but has refused to vanish. Epstein believed it was a serious error to minimize the loyalty of “a strong, resolute and zealous” people to Palestine: “While we harbour fierce sentiments toward the land of our fathers, we forget that the nation now living there is also endowed with a sensitive heart and loving soul. The Arab, like other men, is strongly attached to his homeland” [Brownfeld 1998: 29–31].

### Anti-Zionist Jewish Narratives

During the first decades of Zionism, the leaders of the Old *Yishuv*<sup>1</sup> saw the Jewish settlers, and not the Arab population, as the looming threat. Palestinian rabbis left no doubt about the origins of the violence that flared in the Holy Land: the Zionists had needlessly provoked the nations. In fact, the emergence of Zionism and its rapid, extraordinary success strengthened the circles of pious Jews in their rejection of all military action.

Some of the positions taken by these *Haredim*<sup>2</sup> are quite close those of the Israeli “peace camp.” A document produced by the anti-Zionist group Neturei Karta asserts that [Weiss 2002]:

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<sup>1</sup> *Yishuv*, “colony, settlement”: term designating Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel; the Old Yishuv consisted of the Jewish population before the arrival of the Zionists in the 1880s.

<sup>2</sup> *Haredi*, pl. *Haredim*, lit. “strictly observant”: common appellation of all traditional Jewish groups; visually distinguishable by a binary dress code: black and white; they are often referred to in the media as “ultra-orthodox.”

The Zionist movement was not only a heretical departure from Judaism. [...] It was monstrously blind to the indigenous inhabitants of the Holy Land. In the 1890s, less than 5% of the Holy Land's population was Jewish, yet, Theodore Herzl had the nerve to describe his movement as that of "a people without a land for a land without a people." Time and again both Revisionist and Labour Zionists, the former overtly and the latter under the clouds of deceptive rhetoric, have sought the elimination of the Palestinian people from their state. They have dispossessed thousands and refused them the right of return or minimum compensation. [...] This aggression has plunged the region into its never-ending spiral of bloodshed.

During the fighting provoked by the unilateral declaration of independence by Ben-Gurion in 1948, some *Haredim* not only refused to join the Zionist forces but also demonstrated with white flags in the streets of Jerusalem. Unlike the National-Religious Israelis, who send their children to the army, the *Haredim* are, with a few exceptions, absent from Israel's military to this day.

One of the Hasidic leaders, the Gur Rebbe, encouraged his followers who wished to establish themselves in the Holy Land before the arrival of Zionists. He considered the Arabs a friendly, hospitable people. This relative harmony is also visible in recent works of history dealing with Palestinian society before the proclamation of the state of Israel (see [Rosenberg 1984–1987: v.3, 1071; Segev 2000]). The memory of cordial relations with Arabs neighbours continues to animate the anti-Zionists who decry the strong-arm approach inherent in the exclusive nature of the State.

The Six Day War, which continued the displacement of Palestine's Arabs, caused alarm, rather than jubilation, among many *Haredim*. Rabbi Amram Blau (1894–1974), born in Jerusalem, who opposed Zionism and went on to found the Neturei Karta movement in the 1930s, altogether refused to recognize the state of Israel. Frequently imprisoned for his vocal protests, he called upon Israel to return the territories without delay [Blau 1978]:

If the Zionists had even an iota of common sense [...], they would invite the Arab states to form, with them, a confederation that would embrace the Palestinians, who would thus recover their rights. Peace should be made when one is strong. Now, they [the Zionists] are strong. But they will not do so, because they are prideful, and will refuse to make the slightest concession. They prefer to place the lives of millions of Jews in danger rather than to ever see an Arab as president of such a confederation. By this spectacular, lightening war they imagine they have won. There can be no doubt that today they are at the height of their power. It is at

this point that their descent will begin. It will not be long before they witness all the problems their conquests will bring. The hatred of the Arabs will deepen, and they will seek revenge. The Zionists now have hundreds of thousands of enemies within their borders. All of us who live here are now in great danger.

In reaction to the violent images that have become a part of the second Intifada, anti-Zionist rabbis have redoubled their efforts to dissociate Judaism and Jews in general from the actions of the Israeli armed forces. Among their tactics is the purchase of advertising space in English-language publications in Europe and North America to denounce the violence, which they unambiguously attribute to the ambitions of the Zionists in creating and perpetuating the state of Israel. At a demonstration organized by the Coalition of American Arab and Muslim Organizations in February 2002, a leaflet distributed by anti-Zionist Haredim argued [Karta 2002]:

Its [state of Israel's] cruel treatment of the Palestinian people is against the Creator's imperative that we deal justly and kindly with all men. To all our Arab and Islamic brethren around the world, let the message go forth today, that your quarrel is not with the Jewish people, the people of the Torah. We stand with you in your suffering. We feel your pain. We are with you.

Let there be no more innocent victims, neither Palestinian nor Jew. Let us pray that the Zionist state will, with God's help, soon become a distant and dismal memory.

For all their modest numbers, the anti-Zionist activists have been successful in transmitting their message of reconciliation with the Palestinians and of condemnation of Israeli military operations to a huge Arab and Muslim audience. Likewise, they have given interviews to the al-Jazeera network, which are broadcast throughout the Arab-speaking world, on Iranian television and in innumerable newspapers and magazines.

The rabbinical critique of the violence engendered by Zionism is at times difficult to distinguish from that of secular movements, both Jewish and Arab. Amram Blau of Neturei Karta in Jerusalem accused the Zionists of having no respect for human life: "[...] they have proven to be irresponsible, extended their rule over parts of the Holy Land, which had been inhabited by Arabs, and thereupon brought the entire Arab world into conflict with the Jewish community" [Blau 1974].

The analysis of another contemporary witness, Hannah Arendt, a secular German Jew assimilated into Western culture, barely differs [Arendt 1978]:

And even if the Jews were to win the war, [...] [t]he “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defence. [...] And all this would be the fate of a nation that——no matter how many immigrants it could still absorb and how far it extended its boundaries (the whole of Palestine and Transjordan is the insane Revisionist demand)——would still remain a very small people greatly outnumbered by hostile neighbours.

Both the rabbinical authorities and secular Jewish intellectuals have often used the same arguments to condemn Nakba and to show its ultimate futility.

Veteran left-wing anti-Zionist Haim Hanegbi concludes [*Haaretz* 2003 (Dec. 8)]:

There is something very deep here in our attitude to the indigenous people of this land that drives us out of our minds. There is something gigantic here that doesn't allow us truly to recognize the Palestinians, that doesn't allow us to make peace with them. And that something has to do with the fact that even before the return of the land and the houses and the money, the settlers' first act of expiation toward the natives of this land must be to restore to them their dignity, their memory, their justness.

### **Zionist Narratives**

The precursor of the currently dominant strand in Zionism, Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940), Russian author and politician, was under no illusions about a “land without people.” He recognized that, in the long run, Zionism must displace the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine. Jabotinsky understood the Arab objections to Zionism, but his goal was the achievement of a Jewish state, not the pursuit of some humanitarian ideal. He declared: “We cannot promise any reward either to the Arabs of Palestine or to Arabs abroad. A voluntary agreement is unattainable, and thus those who regard an accord with the Arabs as a condition sine qua non of Zionism must admit to themselves today that this condition cannot be attained hence we must eschew Zionism. We must either suspend our settlement efforts or continue them without paying attention to the mood of the natives. Settlement can develop under the protection of a force which is not dependent on the local population, behind an iron wall which they will be powerless to break down.” Jabotinsky's version of Zionism eventually prevailed and has turned out to be the only enduring one. His disciples were among the most enthusiastic perpetrators of the military actions that constituted Nakba.

Self-righteous insistence on exclusive rights to a country was common in the interwar Europe. Jabotinsky's youth movement Betar was nurtured on the same ethnic nationalist

sentiment as then inhabited many Poles, Latvians and Hungarians. Moreover, revisionist Zionists dovetailed with other nationalist movements since they shared a common conceptual framework—Jews were deemed foreigners by both—and competed neither for the same people, nor for the same territory. A contemporary recalls how two uniformed militants, one of Betar, the other of the Young Lithuanians, met in a small town of the interwar Lithuania. They looked at each other and then each lifted the right arm in a fascist salute [Bаnаrас 1995: 69–70]. It is well known that Jabotinsky was an enthusiastic admirer of Mussolini. Fascist is how several Israeli commentators characterize not only West Bank Zionist settlers but also the new Israeli government formed largely from among the political heirs of Jabotinsky in Spring 2009.

From the beginning, the pioneers had projected onto Palestinian reality the clichés of bygone Russia: the Arab threat was often likened to the murderous shadow of the pogroms. But their actions were like those of all settler groups in a foreign territory; they took up arms and assumed responsibility for the defence and expansion of their settlements. The arrival of masses of European Jews following World War II, and the Zionist interpretation of the genocide of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe created a cultural fusion of immense power: a self-image of the righteous victim. In reality, that was a transformed borrowing from the rabbinical tradition, which presents the Jew as weak in physical strength, but powerful in his confidence in God. As is often the case, the Zionist version inverts the original idea.

In their war with the Arabs in Palestine, Jewish settlers, of primarily Russian origin, believed they were acting in the name of Western civilization. Their determination to impart Culture and Progress on “the Arab savages” has remained a major theme in the Russian language press in Israel, which today boasts more than one million Russian-speaking inhabitants. It is largely this constituency that elected prominent right-wingers who formed the current government of Israel. Russian-speakers are particularly reluctant to acknowledge anything wrong in the circumstances of the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The broadened legitimacy of the use of force set the Jews of Russia apart from those of other countries where armed resistance against non-Jews was neither necessary, nor even conceivable. Russia in the late 19th century was home to millions of Jews ruled by a corrupt bureaucracy. The great majority experienced both impatience and exasperation in the face of the limitations and persecutions they were forced to endure. The shock, anger and frustration touched off by violence against Russian Jews led many of them to radical, often clandestine parties that preached the systematic use of violence [Tessendorf 1986]. Jews flooded into the Russian oppositionist movements, but at the same time founded several specifically Jewish ones. They engaged in terrorist activities against tsarist officials, and developed an expertise that some of the early Zionist settlers brought with them later to the Holy Land.

Jews from Russia made up not only the majority of those who founded the state of



Israel; they also became the backbone of the military elite. The man who did more than any other Zionist to introduce unbridled terror into Palestine was the Russian Avraham Stern (1907–1942), a member and founder of several paramilitary groupings. Traces of the Russian cultural influence are likewise visible in more recent history: Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizmann, Isaac Rabin (1922–1995), Rehavam Zeevi (1926–2001), Raphael Eitan and Ariel Sharon are all descendents of Russian Jews, whose propensity for the use of force can only be matched by their estrangement from Jewish tradition. The two distinguishing features were, at the time, closely related: only by completely rejecting Judaism, with its cult of humility, could Jews acquire unprecedented confidence in their own strength, and in their capacity to re-conquer and defend Israel. Russian Jewish contribution to Zionism has been truly fundamental.

The generation that followed the pioneers in Palestine mirrored the dream of the founders: the next generation saw itself as pragmatic, enjoying excellent physical form, aggressive, and ready to take up arms. Each succeeding generation was less ambiguous than the one before it about the use of armed force: “You can’t build a state wearing white gloves [...]. The job is not always clean and morally attractive,” wrote Nathan Alterman, a leading poet and pillar of the Israeli cultural establishment [Shapira 1992: 368].

Millions of young Jews have been taught an unfounded myth, according to which Palestinians Arabs left their land because Arab leaders had called on them to do so. This myth has been part of the curriculum both in Israel and in Zionist schools elsewhere. The United Nations resolution obliging Israel to accept the returning refugees is nearly forgotten. This is what is still taught in most Zionist schools in the world while in Israel timid changes began to appear in the last few years. The Oslo Process as well as the work of Israel’s New Historians who documented Nakba made these changes possible.

In July 2007, Israel’s Education Ministry authorized Arab schools to use a history book featuring the establishment of the state of Israel as being disastrous for the Palestinians. The third-grade book, *Living together in Israel*, states that some Arab residents were driven out of their homes and became refugees and that Israel confiscated much of their land. The book states [Zelikovich 2007]:

When the war ended, the Jews prevailed and Israel and its neighbours signed a truce [...] the Arabs call the war the ‘Nakba,’ meaning the war of disaster and destruction. The Jews call it the War of Independence.

The ministry’s decision sparked harsh criticism: National Religious Party Chairman MK Zevulun Orlev said this decision was “anti-Zionist and went against the very existence of Israel as a Jewish state.” The current Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman accused “the political left” of constantly looking for ways to justify the other side, when we have nothing to

apologize for... we did what we had to.” However, his party fellow Yisrael Hasson contested that “trying to hide Nakba is like trying to hide the sun with a curtain,” referring to criticism of Liberman. According to Hasson, refusing to acknowledge the Palestinian side of the story “greatly harms the credibility of our (Israel’s) establishment. Every child in Umm Al-Fahm (Arab city inside Israel) knows about Nakba—he grew up with it from the day he was born, and he also knows that his country is ignoring it” [Mar’i 2007].

In Liberman’s short, angry retort, Zionism’s internal tensions, and the relationship between ideology and narrative, are laid bare. For the Zionist right, the textbook is to be denounced, not because it is peddling untruths, but rather because it questions the morality of “doing what we had to”—the ethnic cleansing required to secure a Jewish-majority state in Palestine. The Zionist left, meanwhile, as Liberman correctly points out, is happy to apologize for Nakba, without lifting a finger towards actual restitution—much less questioning the ethno-supremacist fabric of the Zionist state. The hopeless decline of the Zionist left suggests the incompatibility of exclusive ethnic nationalism with basic values of the left. Former members of the Zionist left are either no longer leftist or no longer Zionists.

In most Zionist narratives Nakba is a problematic term. Quite a few Zionists see it as a zero-sum game: either accept the responsibility for Nakba and leave the country or negate the very fact of expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinians. This may explain why no electoral hopeful politician in Israel has expressed any remorse for Nakba. The story of the Israeli textbook bears this out and highlights the fundamental difficulty Nakba poses throughout the Zionist spectrum.

And yet, public conversation in Israel allows more space to acknowledge Nakba than can be even hinted at in public in the United States and many Western countries, where serious critique of Zionism is often branded anti-Semitic and expelled beyond the pale of acceptable discourse. A recent study conducted from Columbia University in New York found 39% of Israeli Jews surveyed believe expulsion by Israel was one of the factors leading to the 1948 exodus, in addition to Palestinian fear and the call of Arabs/Palestinian leaders to leave. An additional 8% believe the refugees were primarily expelled, adding up for a total of 47% that believe expulsion took place. In contrast, only 41% accept the Zionist narrative that rejects even partial expulsion and claims Palestinians left due to their own accord. However, only 4% of the surveyed found that Zionists were primarily responsible for Nakba, while 46% believe that both parties are equally responsible, and 43% blame “the Arabs.”<sup>3</sup>

Travelling in Israel, one may find signposts, landmarks and memorials that create and sustain the Jewish-Israeli narrative. Jewish or Israeli events are celebrated through many

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<sup>3</sup> “Study Surprisingly Finds 47% of Israeli-Jews Believe that the 1948 Palestinian Refugees were Expelled by Israel,” Teachers College, Columbia University, Press Release, April 6, 2009 (<http://www.tc.edu/news/article.htm?id=6811>).

memorials<sup>4</sup> while Palestinian memorials are nowhere to be seen. Moreover, there is an attempt to erase this memory from the collective consciousness and from the landscape. Since Nakba still had little place in the language, the landscape, the environment, and the memory of most Jews in Israel, a Jewish organisation named *Zochrot* (Memories) was established in 2002 to fight against the Israeli society's denial of Nakba. Zochrot activists believe that "learning about Nakba is an important step for Jews living in Israel. [...] But learning is not enough. Nakba is not the story of another people that took place somewhere else—it is a story that we, as Israeli Jews, are responsible for. Learning, without taking responsibility, is to me not enough" [Zochrot n.d.].

Zochrot activists call on their Jewish compatriots to "acknowledge the personal and collective right of return for every refugee that was expelled, and hoping for the implementation of this right, either by returning the lands, paying compensation or implementing actual return. These make learning about Nakba a viable stepping-stone to reconciliation."

Zochrot argues that Nakba is the 'ground zero' of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Awareness and recognition of Nakba by Jewish-Israeli people, and taking responsibility for this tragedy, are essential to ending the struggle and starting a process of reconciliation between the people of Palestine-Israel.

This position is complicated by the widespread fear of undermining Israel as a Jewish state. Allowing Palestinian refugees to return would change the demographic balance in Israel and transform the ethnocratic nature of the Israeli state. However, Zochrot activists believe that life in this new state would be better for both Palestinians and Israelis [Musih n.d.].

At the same time, the incessant conflict and the devoted activism of the National Religious movement have had a profound effect on Judaism in Israel and elsewhere. During the attack on Gaza in Winter 2009, it was the official rabbinate that distributed to Israeli soldiers materials inciting hatred and legitimating murder of civilians [Lynfield 2009]. Many Jews are yet to come to terms with the contradictions between the religion of Judaism they profess to believe in and the Zionist ideology that has in fact taken hold of them.

Thus religious arguments have come to strengthen the *realpolitik* justifications of the Palestinians' suffering. An interesting case in this respect is that of Benny Morris, the Israeli historian who documented Nakba. He regrets that the ethnic cleansing in Palestine has not been as thorough as the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia, which, according to him, benefited from this forced migration. Morris wonders "whether, had 1948 ended differently—with the total separation of the two peoples and the creation of a Palestinian state in what is today Jordan—both peoples would have enjoyed richer and

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<sup>4</sup> There is even a memorial to Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who gunned down dozens of peaceful Muslim worshippers in Hebron.

freer lives. Perhaps, content with statehood, the Palestinians would have gradually dropped the struggle” [Morris 2004: B11].

### **Former Zionists**

While Benny Morris remains unrepentant, this is not the case of Avrum Burg, former Speaker of Israel’s parliament and the Charman of the World Zionist Organization. Mostly in reaction to the violence against the Palestinians, he acknowledges the injustice of Nakba, decries Zionism as suicidal for Israel’s Jews, and sings praise of the multicultural Europe and North America [Burg 2008].

Professor Shlomo Sand of the Tel-Aviv University suggests in his recent book that the concept of the Jewish people is no more than an invention for the benefit of the Zionist enterprise. Zionism, at the time, represented a nationalist movement with four principal objectives: 1) to transform the trans-national Jewish identity centred on the Torah into a national identity modelled on those of the other nations of Europe; 2) to develop a new vernacular tongue, a common national language; 3) to transfer the Jews from their countries of origin to Palestine; and, 4) to establish political and economic control over the Holy Land. While other European nationalists needed only to struggle for control of their countries, populated by relatively compact groups speaking respective national languages, Zionists faced a far greater challenge in attempting to achieve its first three objectives simultaneously.

Sand argues that the idea of a Jewish ethnic nation—whose need for a safe haven was used to justify the founding of the state of Israel—is a myth invented little more than a century ago [Sand 2008]. Theological exile, exile of the spirit, which figures prominently in Jewish tradition, was thus transformed into material dispersion of bodies, belonging to a nation framed in European terms. Moreover, Sand brings an earlier source, which suggests that the most probable biological descendants of the Biblical Hebrews of two millennia ago are Palestinian Arabs. This idea, propounded in the early 1920s by the future Zionist luminaries David Ben-Gurion and Itzhak Ben-Zvi, makes Nakba not only tragic, but also ironic.

Sand, a secular Israeli, adds that the modern Zionist idea of Jews being obligated to return from exile to the Promised Land was entirely alien to Judaism. His book questions the legitimacy of the state of Israel as an ethnocracy, i.e. a state of the Jewish people. This complements a recent history of Jewish religious opposition to Zionism, which shows the Zionist project as a drastic break with traditional Judaism rather than an element of Jewish continuity [Rabkin 2006]. The narrative of former Zionists undermines the legitimacy of “a Jewish and democratic state,” a concept in the name of which Nakba was committed, denied and continues to be justified.

### **Christian Zionists**

The phenomenon of Christian Zionism antedates Herzl's political project but the political prominence of this initial version of Zionism is rather recent. Just a few decades ago, an Israeli political scientist could use the Christian belief in the Second Coming as an example of quietism [Avineri 1981: 4]:

[...] Jews did not relate to the vision of the Return in a more active way than most Christians viewed the Second Coming. As a symbol of belief, integration, and group identity it was a powerful component of the value system; but as an activating element of historical praxis and changing reality through history, it was wholly quietistic.

Nowadays, Christian evangelicals take Second Coming of Jesus as an immediate goal, which is to be attained through the ingathering of Jews in the Holy Land. This explains the unconditional support that millions of Christians around the world offer not only to the state of Israel, but to the most militant Zionist settlers bent on "liberating" the entire territory between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. It is hardly surprising that Nakba finds even less place in the narrative of Christian Zionism than in the official Israeli discourse.

For the Evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell, the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 has been the most crucial event in history since the ascension of Jesus to heaven, and "proof that the second coming of Jesus Christ is nigh. [...] Without a state of Israel in the Holy Land, there cannot be the second coming of Jesus Christ, nor can there be a Last Judgement, nor the End of the World" [Tremblay 2003: 118]. This enthusiastic support is overtly motivated by a single consideration: that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land should be a prelude to their acceptance of Christ, or, for those who fail to do so, to their physical destruction. According to a somewhat sarcastic Israeli author, their scenario is a drama in five acts, where the Jews disappear in the fourth [Gorenberg 2002].

The National-Religious Zionists—and the most highly motivated among them, the settlers in the West Bank—are driven by their own messianic vision and find a common ground with their Christian supporters. The state of Israel officially cultivates the Christian Zionists who, in turn, give it an unconditional support in many countries. "As soon as I say the word 'Israel,' they cry out 'Hallelujah!'" an Israeli diplomat responsible for these contacts assured me. "You cannot imagine an audience better disposed toward us."

While the influence of Christian Zionists may have waned in the wake of the departure of George W. Bush from the White House, their political and financial role in encouraging the continuation of Nakba through Zionist settlement in the West Bank remains pivotal. The most important organization active nowadays is Christians United for Israel: its otherwise

informative web site about Israel does not mention Nakba [CUFI].

Christian Zionists in their enthusiasm to provide a political expression for the affirmation of “Judeo-Christian values” find themselves at the forefront of Islamophobia. This makes Nakba even less visible in their worldview since the conflict in Israel/Palestine is presented not as a political conflict about land and water but as a result of the religious, ostensibly eternal, anti-Jewish hatred rooted in Islam. Palestinian resistance is framed as another manifestation of the Clash of Civilizations.

Christian Zionist commitment to Israel cannot be shaken by anything the Israeli government or the Israeli army may do to Palestinians. While for quite a few Jews, Israel is a real place with friends and relatives living there, for Christian Zionists, the state of Israel is the embodiment of Biblical prophecy, a virtual Israel. This idealisation of the state of Israel by Christian Zionists, and to a lesser degree, by Jewish Zionists, may constitute the most important religious obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

More and more Israeli Jews are now said to favour the deportation of the Palestinians, both Israeli citizens and others, to the neighbouring Arab countries and the outright annexation of the Territories occupied in 1967. Still, such a perspective remains repugnant to many Jews in Israel and, particularly, elsewhere in the world. Some of them have concluded that to maintain the state of Israel, as it is presently constituted, requires measures that are no longer acceptable to those who try to uphold morality. It is becoming more and more difficult to justify Israel’s actions with respect to the Palestinians. As the Chief Rabbi of Britain Jonathan Sacks once remarked, “righteousness and self-righteousness are mutually exclusive.”

The victim of the first political murder attributed to the Zionists was a Jew, Jacob De Haan, a socialite who represented the traditional Jewish communities in Palestine to the British and international authorities. A Hagana operative shot him in Jerusalem in 1923 as he was leaving a synagogue after prayer. Rejecting the idea of a Jewish state, he was bringing together Haredi and Arab leaders to work for the preservation of the ethnic and confessional diversity in Palestine, which had ensured peace in the land. The spectre of Jewish-Arab coexistence must have struck terror in the hearts of the leading Zionists, and De Haan was assassinated.

It follows that Zionist intellectuals have come to misrepresent the history of Jews in Muslim, especially Arab, lands as an incessant litany of persecution and humiliation. A constituent element of Islamophobia, this campaign aims at undermining prospects of a common state for Jews and Arabs that the realisation of the right to return of Palestinian refugees would inevitably bring about. While recognising the fact, albeit not the causes, of Nakba, this campaign also aims at presenting the uprooting of Jewish communities in most

Arab countries in the wake of the establishment of Israel as an expulsion on the part of “the Arabs.” A sort of ex post facto justice is then postulated: Nakba has been compensated by the migration of Jews from Arab countries to Israel.

Some advocates of the rights of Palestinians may inadvertently reinforce Zionist narrative. The use of anti-Semitic images and books borrowed from Europe and translated into Arabic not only strengthens Islamophobia, but also confirms the Zionists’ claim about the impossibility of Jewish-Arab coexistence. It discredits the Palestinian cause and makes Nakba acceptable as a necessary evil. On the contrary, emphasis on the history of harmony between Jews and Arabs, on decoupling Judaism from Zionism and Jews from the state of Israel, tends to undermine Zionist rhetoric. The Zionists’ insistence on separate development would then appear unwarranted and anachronistic. Anti-Semitism not only undermines the legitimacy of the opposition to Zionism and the exclusive Zionist state. It provides Zionism with its most potent *raison d’être*.

Zionism has divided the Jews more than any other issue in recent memory. This offers an opportunity to mobilise the support of many Jews, particularly if the plight of the Palestinian refugees is presented as an issue of individual human rights rather than of conflicting nationalisms. Members of a Palestinian family that lost its house in Jerusalem or Safed for no fault of their own would provoke more natural sympathy than political sentiments. Framing Nakba in humanitarian, rather than nationalist, terms is likely to be more effective in bringing about restitution.

The sympathy of many people, including Jews, lies with the long-suffering Palestinians. A documented story of Nakba must strengthen this identification. While it is known that Muslims saved Jews during the Hebron massacre in 1929, there is apparently no record of Palestinian Jews sheltering Palestinian Muslims and Christians from the assault of Zionist forces in 1948. This may be due to the long-standing denial of Nakba in Israeli society and to the difficulty of incorporating the memory of such acts of solidarity in the heroic Israeli narrative. I recently interviewed a female member of the Lehi group<sup>5</sup> who was participating in the ethnic cleansing in 1948. She told me how she had saved a village woman from rape by a Lehi commander, but a record of such episodes remains to be established. This would represent a contribution to the history of “discourses and practices of gendered nation-making and ethno-racial ideas” [De Groot 2009: 422]. Rape has been a common means of terrorizing populations and making families flee “of their own volition.”

At the same time, Israeli authorities are turning less tolerant with respect to dissident Jews. The police raided feminist organizations helping Israeli girls avoid military service. Israel barred entry to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Richard Falk, who

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<sup>5</sup> One of the more militant Zionist militias.



considers the treatment of Palestinians as a war crime, and to the American academic Norman Finkelstein, the author of *The Holocaust Industry* and an outspoken critic of Israel's impunity.

Both of them are Jews, and their expulsion from Israel clashes with the claim of the Zionist state to be a haven for world Jewry. In the event, the majority of Jews prefer to live in their countries rather than in the perennially tumultuous "state of the Jewish people." Jews played an active role in combating prejudice and discrimination in many countries, and they also benefited from the fruit of these activities. That some of them support ethno-religious discrimination in the state of Israel appears at best as cognitive dissonance, and at worst as blatant double standard. This is why a growing number of Jews, particularly among the young, are critical of what Israel is and does. In the name of whom was then Nakba perpetrated? In the name of whom has the Holy Land been plunged in a bloody crisis for over a century? These questions are particularly relevant to commemoration of Nakba.

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